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WETLAND OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE **2005 Honor Given To** **Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve**

Imperial Beach, CA – The “Wetland of International Importance” designation of the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge located in Imperial Beach, was celebrated today, 2005 Earth Day, by dignitaries from both sides of the Border.

“This distinction is a great honor for our region,” said Dr. Fred Cagle, president of the Southwest Interpretive Association (SWIA), the petitioning organization. “Our unique location situated between two countries -- U.S. and Mexico, gives prominence to the importance of wetland management and research.”

The Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge (also known as the Tijuana Estuary) becomes one of only 22 notable U.S. sites. Two sites additional sites named this spring are the Grasslands Ecological Area in western Merced County in the San Joaquin Valley, California and the Kawainui and Hamakua Marsh Complex on the island of O’ahu, Hawaii.

Known to San Diegans as one of the birding “hot spots” of the County, the Reserve provides habitat for more than 370 bird species, including nine federally listed as threatened or endangered. The only bi-national watershed in California, it shares a watershed with Mexico and is a major stopover for migrating birds using the Pacific flyway. A recent ecotourism study completed on behalf of the City of Imperial Beach indicated that the Tijuana Estuary would be an important attraction nationally for birdwatchers.

Dr. Mike McCoy, a founding member of the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association and Imperial Beach resident worked for years to gain such recognition for the Reserve. “This comes in the Estuary’s 25th anniversary year and is one of the defining moments in our work of conserving the Tijuana Estuary; it’s a great birthday present.”

The Estuary's bi-national education, outreach and restoration programs continue to change the face of the estuary by providing educational information to the community and habitat for a great variety and abundance of migratory birds and plant species. Over 60,000 visitors to the Estuary each year enjoy the tranquility of one of the last of southern California's wetlands not bisected by a road or rail trestle.

There are eight criteria for a wetland to be considered internationally important. It must meet at least one of the following criteria: 1) be a representative, rare or unique example of a natural or near-natural wetland found within a biogeographic region, 2) support vulnerable, endangered species or threatened ecological communities, 3) support plant or animal species important for maintaining the biological diversity of a region, 4) support plant or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles or provides refuge during adverse conditions, 5) regularly support twenty-thousand or more water birds, 6) regularly support one-percent of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of water bird, 7) support significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and populations that are representative of wetlands benefits and thereby contributes to global biological diversity, and 8) be an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and or migration path for fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere.

In 1971, the Ramsar Convention (named after Ramsar, Iran) became the only international agreement dedicated to the worldwide protection of a particular type of ecosystem. Currently there are 144 member nations working together to coordinate wetland conservation efforts. Because many wetland habitats span international boundaries and many wetland species are migratory, Ramsar countries recognize the importance of supporting wetland management, research and education, outreach and training programs beyond their own borders. The United States became a signatory of the convention treaty in 1987.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Department of State are the administrative authorities for this Convention in the U.S., and it is this treaty that serves as the cornerstone for the Service's International Wetlands Program. The qualifying criteria to be a Ramsar site are based on the wetland's distinguishing characteristics and its ability to support valued species or key wildlife populations. Mendel Stewart, Project Leader of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex, spoke about the future of the Reserve noting that, "the Estuary's designation as a Wetland of International Importance is another building block that will help the Service and our partners address watershed-wide ecological problems."

For more information on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service International Wetlands Program, visit: <http://international.fws.gov/ramsar/ramsar.htm>. For more information about Ramsar visit www.ramsar.org. For more information about SWIA, visit: www.swia4earth.org or call 619/575-0550.

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